NIAGARA'S RAINBOW

THE LEGEND OF THE

WHITE CANOE

WILLARD PARKER

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NIAGARA'S RAINBOW

To

CHIEF WILBUR CLIFFORD SHONGO

Wolf Clan, Seneca Tribe,

Iroquois Confederacy.

Late Curator, Indian Department Buffalo Historical Society, in recognition of his helpful suggestions both as to text and illustrations.

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BY

WILLARD PARKER

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INTRODUCTION

THE Legend of the White Canoe, substantially as told by Mr. Parker in his poem. is one of the oldest and best authenticated of the many Indian Legends which cluster about the great Niagara Falls. The phenomenon of the Rainbow, which shows itself in the sprays of Niagara in greater perfection than anywhere else on the globe, is also well known to visitors and residents at the Falls. It seems, however, to have remained for Mr. Parker's poetic imagination to first discover the *connection* between the sacrifice and the bow.

WILBUR CLIFFORD SHONGO
Chief Seneca Tribe, Wolf Clan,
Iroquois Confederacy.

May, 1922.

OLD YA-GAO-TAH'S TALE

I

Yon Rainbow, circling great Niagara's brow,
Tells, children, of a chieftain's awful vow;
Hark to its tale of sadness and of love,
All other legends of our race above:
The story of Wenona's White Canoe,
The grand devotion of her lover true,
The fate that swept their youthful lives
away,
Marked by Niagara's Rainbow to this day.

"Yon Rainbow, circling great Niagara's brow"

II

For know, my children, in the days of yore,
Or ever white man's foot had pressed this shore,
In forest deep and dark our fathers dwelt,
Before the Manitou devoted knelt,
Craved His protection and His mighty aid
Against the foe and famine—to Him prayed
When pestilence up-raised its baleful head,
Swelling the gruesome ranks of warrior dead.

"Craved His protection and His mighty aid"

III

But comes a day when prayer and offering
fail,
When medicines of wise men naught avail,
When through the tribe, with footsteps
grim and gaunt,
Stalk the twin spectres, Pestilence and Want.
In terror then, around the council fire
Gather the chiefs, their head Wenonah's sire;
"What can we offer Thee, Oh! Manitou?"
Speaks the Great Spirit then: "The White
Canoe!"

"In terror then, around the council fire gather the chiefs"

IV

Full well they know the precious sacrifice
Demanded, but, though terrible the price,
To save the few still left it must be paid—
Niagara's Water-god the fairest maid
Of all the tribe as offering must claim—
Her sacrifice to cleanse the tribe of blame.
Who shall it be? Alas! there is but one
On whom the lot can fall! The deed is done!

"Who shall it be? Alas! there is but one on whom the lot can fall"

V

Like arrow to the mark each glance now turns

Toward fair Wenonah, and her sire's heart yearns

At thought that she—his dear—his only child,

Must seek her fate beneath the waters wild.

Stately he rises in his place: "Nay! nay!"

He cries, "If naught but that our doom can stay,

We'll brave the famine's pestilential breath,

Till all the tribe lies stark and cold in death!"

"Stately he rises in his place: 'Nay! nay!' he cries"

VI

Up springs Wenonah: "Father! hear me speak!

Though but a woman, think me not so weak

That I would shrink, a coward, from flood or fire,

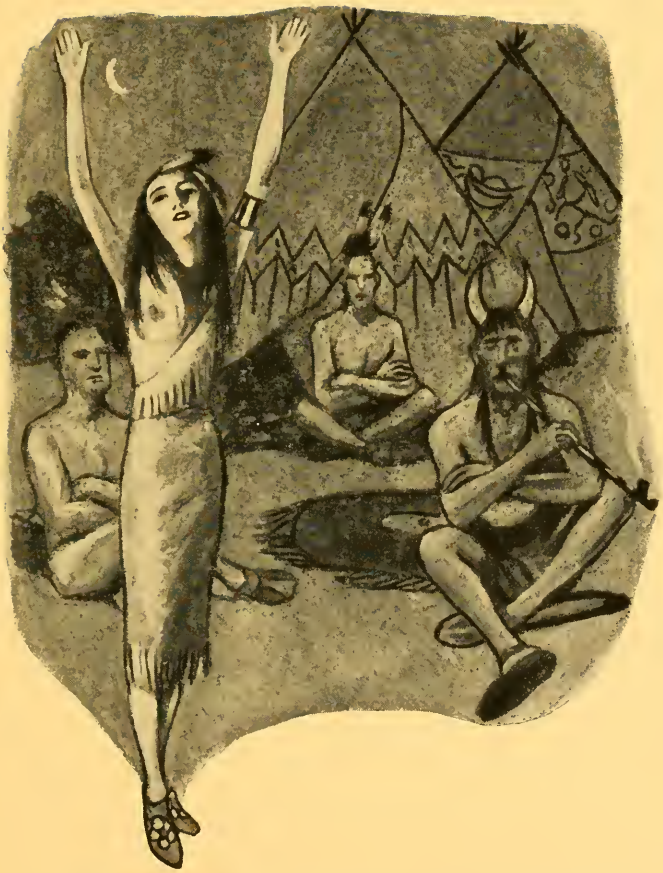
To save my tribe! My blood is thine, my sire!

Lead on, Oh! warriors, to Niagara's Fall,

Its might shall not my woman's heart appal!

Farewell, my sire! Uncas, my love, farewell!

Great Water-god! sound thou Wenonah's knell!"



"Great Water-god! Sound thou Wenonah's knell"

VII

And now, through leagues of forest have they tracked
Their mournful way toward the Cataract.
Before that band of dusky warriors grim
Stalks, stern and silent, the gaunt form of him
Who, savage chieftain of a savage race,
Yet, sorrow pictured in his warrior face,
Now, torn with anguish, offers up his child,
A sacrifice unto the waters wild.

"Before that band of dusky warriors grim"

VIII

Amid the circle of her dusky maids,

Wenonah treads the darksome forest glades,

The fairest of her tribe—her Nation's pride—

While Uncas walks dejected by her side.

And though her own brave eyes are filled
with tears,

She strives with cheerful word to calm his
fears,

But nought can give his troubled spirit rest,

Or loose those savage lips, with grief
compressed.

"And though her own brave eyes are filled with tears"

IX

Now, as she hears Niagara's deep boom,
A premonition of her dreadful doom,
Reverberating through the forest aisles,
Up in her lover's face she faintly smiles,
And whispers of that land beyond the grave,
That bourne of maiden pure and warrior brave,
Where she, though now torn weeping from his side,
In the Great Spirit's home may be his bride.

"Up in her lover's face she faintly smiles"

X

The White Canoe receives its precious
freight

Of flowers and fruit, and, clad in mimic
state,

Reclines amid the bloom, Wenonah fair—

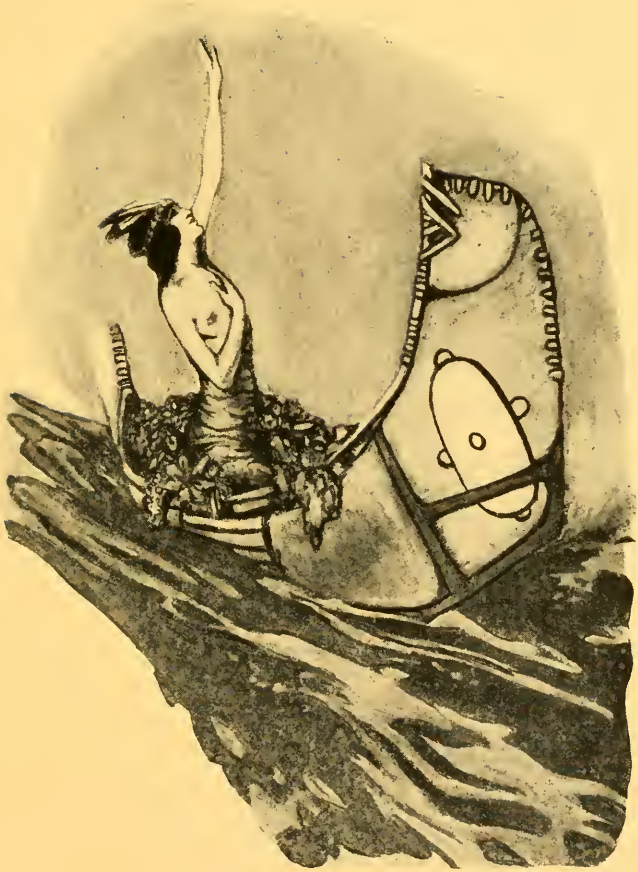
Most luscious fruit, and fairest blossom
there.

The warriors grim, smile on such beauteous
bribe,

To lure the spirits blessing on their tribe,

And all save Uncas gaze with eager eye,

As bark and burden down the current fly.



"As bark and burden down the current fly"

XI

But not alone must poor Wenonah brave
That dreadful vortex, for, though nought
can save,
A love there is, death even cannot part,
And such the love that fills brave Uncas'
heart;
A single stroke and they are side by side,
Alone—together—'mid the boiling tide!
Hand clasped in hand as plunging o'er the
brink—
Heart throbs with heart as in the flood
they sink.

"Heart throbs with heart as in the flood they sink"

XII

The stricken warriors turn in mute dismay,
Then silent—saddened—take their homeward way,
And on their heads, from out the cloudless blue,
The spray-drops fall, tinted with rainbow's hue.
"The Spirit weeps," they cry, "for Uncas brave—
The Spirit's bow lies upon Uncas' Grave!"
And still the mists from her vexed bosom rise,
Niagara's tears for Love's great sacrifice,
And still o'er Uncas' grave the spirit's rainbow lies.

"The Spirit weeps," they cry, "for Uncas brave —
The Spirit's bow lies upon Uncas' grave"

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